

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR, AS

SUBJECT: RESIGNATION OF SPEAKER OF AUSTRALIAN HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

REF: STATE 044714

1. SUMMARY: IN UNUSUALLY TUMULTUOUS SESSION FEB 27 SPEAKER OF HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COPE ANNOUNCED RESIGNATION AFTER HE WAS DISAVOWED BY PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM AND LABOR MAJORITY. COPE WAS INITIALLY REPLACED BY FORMER DEPUTY SPEAKER SCHOLES, WHO WAS LATER ELECTED AS NEW SPEAKER. EVENTS SHOWED ALL CONCERNED TO DISADVANTAGE, BUT PROBABLY DAMAGED LABOR GOVERNMENT MORE THAN OPPOSITION. INCIDENT REFLECTS RISING TIDE OF ELECTION NERVES, AS DO DISORDERLY SCENES PROVOKED BY OTHER EVENTS FEB 27 IN STATE PARLIAMENTS OF NEW SOUTH WALES AND SOUTH AUSTRALIA. POTENTIALLY OMINOUS DEVELOPMENT FOR LABOR WAS FACT THAT THREE CABINET MINISTERS ABSTAINED IN VOTE IN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. SEQUENCE OF EVENTS FEB 27 ADDS TO PRESSURES BUILDING UP TO FORCE NATIONAL ELECTIONS THIS YEAR. END SUMMARY.

2. IN UNUSUALLY TUMULTUOUS SESSION, EVEN BY HURLY-BURLY AUSTRALIAN STANDARDS, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SESSION OF FEB 27 SAW REPUDIATION BY LABOR GOVERNMENT OF SPEAKER OF HOUSE JAMES COPE (HIMSELF AN ELECTED LABOR MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT) AND ELECTION OF FORMER DEPUTY SPEAKER, GORDON SCHOLES (LABOR,
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VICTORIA), AS HIS REPLACEMENT. EMBASSY REPORTING INCIDENT IN

CONSIDERABLE DETAIL AS EVENTS WERE CONFUSED AND RAPID-MOVING AND REQUIRE RELATIVELY FULL TREATMENT IF THEY ARE TO BE UNDERSTOOD.

3. COPE HAS HAD CONSIDERABLE DIFFICULTY IN CONTROLLING HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES FOR SOME MONTHS, ACCENTUATED RECENTLY BY GROWING SENSE IN PARLIAMENT AND THROUGHOUT AUSTRALIA THAT NATIONAL ELECTIONS MAY TAKE PLACE THIS YEAR. CONSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR DOUBLE DISSOLUTION OF BOTH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT HAVE BEEN MET FOR PAST MONTH, AND SENATE HAS REJECTED EIGHT SIGNIFICANT LABOR GOVERNMENT BILLS THIS WEEK, DEALING WITH RANGE OF DOMESTIC ISSUES, SUCH AS CONTROL OF SEABEDS, HEALTH LEGISLATION, AND ELECTORAL REFORM. IN ELECTIONS ATMOSPHERE PRIME MINISTER HAS DELIBERATELY SET OUT TO DENIGRATE OPPOSITION LEADER SNEDDEN, BOTH IN PARLIAMENT AND IN PUBLIC SPEECHES, FURTHER CONTRIBUTING TO POLITICAL TENSIONS.

4. LABOR GOVERNMENT HAS ALSO SOUGHT TO DRAW ATTENTION TO WHAT IT REGARDS AS LABOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS THROUGH SERIES OF PLANTED QUESTIONS ADDRESSED TO CABINET MEMBERS BY LABOR MEMBERS, USING DAILY QUESTION TIME IN BOTH HOUSES FOR THE PURPOSE. PATENT POLITICAL PURPOSE OF SUCH QUESTIONS HAS CONSIDERABLY ANNOYED OPPOSITION, FOR WHOM QUESTION TIME IS VIRTUALLY THEIR ONLY OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE POINTS AGAINST GOVERNMENT IN MANNER LIKELY TO ATTRACT MEDIA ATTENTION.

5. JOINT FRUSTRATIONS EXPLODED IN HOUSE FEB 27 AFTER ONE HOUR QUESTION TIME MARKED BY CONTINUING POINTS OF ORDER, IN WHICH ONLY TWO QUESTIONS WERE ASKED AND ANSWERED. IN FOLLOWING QTE PERSONAL EXPLANATIONS END QTE PERIOD, WHEN MEMBERS ARE PERMITTED TO CLARIFY WHAT THEY REGARD AS MISREPRESENTATIONS BY OTHER MEMBERS OR BY THE MEDIA, MINISTER FOR LABOR CAMERON STATED HE HAD BEEN MISREPRESENTED IN PRESS OVER THE AFFAIRS OF RUNAWAY BRITISH MP JOHN STONEHOUSE. CAMERON CLAIMED THAT HE HAD OFFERED OPPOSITION IMMIGRATION SPOKESMAN, MICHAEL MACKELLAR (LIBERAL, NSW), OPPORTUNITY TO REVIEW THE COMPLETE FILE ON STONEHOUSE BUT THAT MACKELLAR HAD DECLINED TO DO SO. MACKELLAR INTERJECTED THAT HE HAD NEVER BEEN INVITED TO REVIEW FILE.

6. AT THIS POINT OPPOSITION SPOKESMAN FOR DEFENSE JAMES FORBES LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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(LIBERAL, SOUTH AUSTRALIA) LEAPED TO HIS FEET AND DEMANDED TO KNOW IF CAMERON WAS ENTITLED TO QTE TELL A MONSTROUS LIE? HE IS ALWAYS DOING THIS. END QTE. SPEAKER COPE ASKED FORBES TO WITHDRAW HIS STATEMENT, WITH FORBES ULTIMATELY REPLACING QTE MONSTROUS LIE END QTE WITH QTE AN UNTRUTH END QTE. CAMERON SOUGHT TO RESUME HIS STATEMENT, ONLY TO BE CALLED TO ORDER BY SPEAKER. BY THIS TIME SPEAKER WAS CALLING ALMOST EVERYONE TO ORDER AND, PRESUMABLY, WOULD HAVE SHORTLY ASKED CAMERON TO

RESUME HIS STATEMENT. HOWEVER, CAMERON WAS THOROUGHLY NETTLED BY THIS POINT AND UTTERED FATAL WORDS TO SPEAKER, QTE LOOK, I DON'T GIVE A DAMN WHAT YOU SAY. END QTE. THIS REMARK MET WITH INSTANT CHORUS FROM OPPOSITION, QTE NAME HIM, NAME HIM END QTE (I.E., EXPEL CAMERON FROM HOUSE FOR UNPARLIAMENTARY REMARKS INSULTING TO SPEAKER). COPE, HIS DIGNITY DIRECTLY AFFRONTED, GAVE CAMERON THREE OPPORTUNITIES TO WITHDRAW HIS REMARK. CAMERON PROBABLY WOULD HAVE DONE SO, AS HE IS NORMALLY VERY COURTEOUS, THOUGH HE ALSO HAS VERY SHORT TEMPER. HOWEVER, PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM INTERVENED AT THIS POINT AND WAS OBSERVED TO INSTRUCT CAMERON NOT RPT NOT TO WITHDRAW REMARK. CAMERON SAT DOWN, FOLDED HIS ARMS, AND LOYALLY REMAINED SILENT. SPEAKER COPE THEN QTE NAMED END QTE CAMERON. NORMALLY, GOVERNMENT LEADER OF HOUSE (MINISTER FOR SERVICES DALY) SHOULD THEN HAVE INTRODUCED MOTION TO EXCUSE CAMERON QTE FROM SERVICE OF HOUSE END QTE, PRESUMABLY FOR 24 HOURS, THE USUAL TERM OF SUSPENSION FOR UNPARLIAMENTARY REMARK. AGAIN, WHITLAM INTERVENED AND VISIBLY PUSHED DALY BACK FROM PODIUM AND THUS FROM MOVING MOTION OF SUSPENSION OF CAMERON.

7. OPPOSITION COULD SEE THE BYPLAY IN FRONT OF THEM, AND OPPOSITION LEADER OF HOUSE, IAN SINCLAIR (COUNTRY PARTY, NEW SOUTH WALES), MOVED USUAL MOTION OF SUSPENSION OF CAMERON WHEN DALY TOOK NO ACTION. OPPOSITION SPEAKERS NOTED FAILURE OF DALY TO MOVE MOTION OF SUSPENSION. HOUSE THEN DIVIDED (I.E., VOTED ON SUSPENSION). WHITLAM, HIS FACE CONTORTED WITH ANGER, WENT UP TO COPE, AND MADE REMARK IN COPE'S EAR. THIS REMARK NOT RPT NOT OFFICIALLY RECORDED, BUT OPPOSITION MEMBERS STATE THEY HEARD WHITLAM SAY, QTE YOU BLOODY IDIOT, YOU'VE STUFFED IT NOW END QTE (AMERICAN TRANSLATION: QTE YOU'VE FOULED IT UP NOW END QTE) THERE WERE ALSO UNRECORDED VERBAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN WHITLAM AND OPPOSITION LEADER SNEDDEN AND SOME PUSHING AND SHOVING.

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ACTION EA-10

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8. AFTER DIVISION (I.E., VOTE ON SINCLAIR MOTION) COMPLETED, SPEAKER COPE ANNOUNCED MOTION TO SUSPEND CAMERON HAD BEEN DEFEATED (ESSENTIALLY ON PARTY LINES), 55 TO 50. CONSEQUENTLY, CAMERON WAS NOT RPT NOT SUSPENDED. HOWEVER, PRESS OBSERVERS NOTED THAT MINISTER FOR EDUCATION BEAZLEY, MINISTER FOR HEALTH EVERINGHAM, MINISTER FOR TOURISM STEWART, AND DEPUTY SPEAKER SCHOLES DID NOT RPT NOT VOTE ON MOTION, REMAINING SEATED IN THEIR NORMAL PLACES. SCHOLES LATER EXPLAINED TO PRESS THAT HE FELT HE COULD NOT VOTE ON MOTION AFFECTING SPEAKER. BEAZLEY TOLD PRESS LATER HE WOULD HAVE ACCEPTED RULING RESULTING IN HIS OWN SUSPENSION FROM PARLIAMENT AND ADDED THERE WAS TOO LITTLE RESPECT FOR SPEAKER. REMAINING LABOR AND OPPOSITION MEMBERS OF HOUSE WERE ABSENT DUE TO ILLNESS OR TRAVEL OR PAIRED WITH OPPOSITION. OPPOSITION MEMBERS PRESENT VOTED UNANIMOUSLY FOR SINCLAIR MOTION TO SUSPEND CAMERON.

9. FOLLOWING ANNOUNCEMENT OF RESULT OF VOTE, SPEAKER COPE ANNOUNCED QTE GENTLEMEN, I HEREBY TENDER MY RESIGNATION AS SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. I INTEND TO DO IT BY WRITING TO THE GOVERNOR GENERAL. I ASK THE DEPUTY SPEAKER (I.E., SCHOLES) TO TAKE THE CHAIR. END QTE. AT THIS POINT, OPPOSITION, WHICH HAS GIVEN COPE MANY DIFFICULT MOMENTS OVER PAST TWO YEARS, APPLAUDED COPE FOR HIS COURAGE.

10. AT USUAL EVENING SESSION FEB 27 DEPUTY SPEAKER SCHOLES WAS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ELECTED TO REPLACE COPE, WHO REMAINS IN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AS BACK-BENCHER.

11. PRESS AND MEDIA COMMENT HAS BEEN HIGHLY CRITICAL OF WHOLE COMPLEX OF EVENTS, WITH "AUSTRALIAN" COMMENTING FEB 28 QTE THE DEMISE OF DEMOCRACY IS INDEED AT HAND. THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENT IS HYSTERICAL, THE NATION OUTRAGED. THE CHILDISH, INANE, TIME-WASTING, IRRESPONSIBLE, DISRUPTIVE, CHAOTIC SERIES OF EVENTS IN CANBERRA YESTERDAY, LEADING TO THE RESIGNATION OF THE SPEAKER,

CAN ONLY DISMAY EVERY VOTER WHO CARES AT ALL ABOUT HIS RIGHT TO VOTE....END QTE "FINANCIAL REVIEW" COMMENTATOR ROBERT HAUPT WROTE FEB 28, QTE IN AN EXTRAORDINARY PERFORMANCE WHICH LED TO THE RESIGNATION OF THE LABOR SPEAKER, MR. JIM COPE, MR. WHITLAM SUCCEDED TO HIS MORE PRIVATE SELF -- THE FOUL-MOUTHED SCHOOLBOY BULLY. END QTE. OTHER NEWSPAPERS GENERALLY COMMENTED IN SAME VEIN.

12. COMMENT: WHOLE AFFAIR IS LARGELY ATTRIBUTABLE TO ONSET OF ELECTION NERVES, WHICH HAS CLEARLY AFFECTED WHOLE PARLIAMENT. FACT THAT UNUSUALLY DISORDERLY SCENES ALSO TOOK PLACE, ON DIFFERENT ISSUES, IN STATE PARLIAMENTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES AND SOUTH AUSTRALIA ON SAME DAY, ALSO ATTESTS TO RISE IN POLITICAL TENSION.

13. ON BALANCE, LABOR PROBABLY LOST MORE THAN OPPOSITION FROM EVENTS OF FEB 27, WITH PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM SUFFERING THE MOST. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION HAS CERTAINLY DETERIORATED. MOREOVER, DEBATE OF FEB 28 ON FAMILY LAW BILL (COVERING CONTROVERSIAL CHANGES IN DIVORCE AND FAMILY MAINTENANCE LAW) WILL PROBABLY WORSEN SITUATION, ALTHOUGH THERE WILL BE FREE VOTE ON IT (I.E., ON NON-PARTY LINES). FAMILY LAW BILL HAS GENERATED CONSIDERABLE EMOTION AND WILL PROBABLY ADD TO PRESENT TENSIONS.

14. MOST OMINOUS INDICATION FOR LABOR GOVERNMENT WAS ABSTENTION OF THREE CABINET MEMBERS ON VOTE TO SUSPEND CAMERON (ABOVE). THIS IS PERHAPS ONLY ONE STRAW IN THE WIND, BUT THIS KIND OF PUBLIC BREAK IN PARTY DISCIPLINE IS UNUSUAL IN AUSTRALIA. SENATE WAS NOT RPT NOT, OF COURSE INVOLVED IN EVENTS IN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, BUT SENATOR GEORGES (LABOR LEFTIST FROM QUEENSLAND) IS REPORTED IN PRESS AS HAVING STATED THAT LABOR LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PARLIAMENTARY CAUCUS WILL NOT TOLERATE ANOTHER QTE COPE AFFAIR END QTE WITHOUT FULL EXPLANATION FROM PRIME MINISTER. ALTHOUGH VIRTUALLY ALL OF LABOR MEMBERS OF HOUSE LOYALLY VOTED WITH PRIME MINISTER ON REJECTION OF MOTION SUSPENDING CAMERON, MANY OF THEM PROBABLY DID SO TO AVOID OPEN SPLIT IN HOUSE. HARROP

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